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Generating Power.

Discourses on Development around the Nepalese Arun-3 Hydropower Project.

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Abstract

Contested since 1990, the Arun-3 dam in Nepal has so far generated more heat than hydropower involving a host of complex negotiations between its advocates and critics on the local, national and transnational levels. Cancelled after a complaint before the World Bank Inspection Panel in 1995, work is soon to be resumed. An Indian public sector company interested in exporting the electricity to India will finance it. This paper focuses on how local communities have experienced the decade-long uncertainties concerning the project and the approach road to be built. Their hopes of access to markets, electrification and a modern life-style will be explored in the context of an understanding of development as a desiring machine and governmentality studies. I will argue for a parallel application of the two approaches to conceptualize the entanglement of desires for development and a deep sense of local powerlessness vis-a-vis external actors.

Keywords: Nepal; hydropower; development; discourse; desire;

Introduction

One crisp morning in October 2010, I was sitting in the kitchen of Angrita and Norbu Sherpa having a cup of hot milk.ⁱ They live in Bakle, a village of about fifteen houses high up on a ridge above the Arun in North-Eastern Nepal, too high for the cultivation of rice. Most of the maize and millet was already harvested, leaving the fields barren, unlike the lush paddy terraces of Num on the other side of the valley. Halfway between Bakle and Num, on the valley floor, is the proposed site for the Arun-3 dam, a scheme that has been the most controversial development project in Nepal's history. When I asked the middle-aged couple what their opinion of the dam was, Norbu answered:

“For the sake of development we desire the Arun-3 project. The most important thing is the desire. Our desire is that when Arun-3 comes, transportation will also be made available and this will develop our village. If Arun-3 is developed quickly, in the future, with transportation, a market will be available for people to buy and sell their goods. We will also obtain employment.”

In this paper, I want to focus on the way people in the Upper Arun Valley cope with their desire for development in the face of this highly contested dam. After the only successful claim before the Inspection Panel of the World Bank, the project was cancelled in 1995, but recently resumed by an Indian company. I begin with a brief introduction to the project's chequered 20-year-long history, the current energy situation in Nepal and the Yamphu Rai, a small indigenous group that constitutes the majority of inhabitants around the dam site. After that I will discuss Pieter de Vries' (2007) call to engage with Third World people's desire for development and his critique of governmentality approaches for their alleged neglect to take that desire seriously. I will argue that he raises important questions but contents himself with making a sophisticated argument against post-development approaches. By establishing a one-

dimensional dichotomy between desiring-production and governmentality he falls short of engaging ethnographically with the desire for development. In an attempt to tie this discussion back to the way affected people perceive development projects I will subsequently focus on how people in the Upper Arun Valley speak about their hopes and desires in the face of powerful outside actors and a continuously uncertain future, following David Mosse's (2005) proposition of a new ethnography of development. My concluding remarks will discuss the danger of othering desire through an exclusive focus on the Third World.

A dam cancelled and reincarnated

The Arun-3 dam project was originally designed as a 402 MW run-of-the-river hydropower plant with a 50 ha storage lake and a 12 km tunnel system to divert the water to an underground powerhouse. Japanese hydropower consultants designed this setup in the 1980s (MoWR & JICA 1985), thus still during the autocratic rule of the King, euphemistically called "party-less Panchayat democracy". When a popular uprising that came to be known as Jana Andolan (People's Movement) led to the re-establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990, pre-construction had already started, with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank as lead donors for the 1.1 Billion US-Dollar project – by far the largest investment ever to be made in Nepal. But as the Panchayat regime was no longer able to sustain its tight control over public opinion and the press, the first overt criticism of the project appeared in the government-owned English daily *The Rising Nepal* on 13 June 1990. That article by Dipak Gyawali stated that "the entire process of power planning and development has been hijacked by Arun-3" and gave the starting signal for the first civil society movement in Nepal. The initial group of activists mainly consisted of foreign trained

engineers, journalists, social scientist and lawyers, some of which had grown up in the Arun Valley. They had been active in the popular uprising of the previous months and were keen to expand their mobilization for democratic change into one of the most opaque sectors of Nepalese politics and economy: foreign-funded development. Soon they organized themselves into NGOs, most notably the Alliance for Energy and later the Arun Concerned Group, criticizing the Arun-3 primarily for economic reasons. Doubting the country's capacity to cope with a capital expenditure twice as high as the annual budget, they strongly opposed the World Bank's 42 conditionalities tied to the loan and claimed that Nepal could generate the same amount of electricity much cheaper with four or five smaller hydropower projects (ACG 1994).

In 1994, after four years of campaigning in Nepal and abroad, the Arun Concerned Group brought the case before the newly established Inspection Panel of the World Bank. It was the first case to be examined through this mechanism. After nine months of investigation, the panel delivered a highly critical report concluding that it is "doubtful that the project's mitigatory environmental and social measures can be implemented within the time frame proposed by IDA" (WBIP 1995: 5). Within five weeks of the final report of the Inspection Panel the newly appointed President of the World Bank James Wolfensohn decided to withdraw from the controversial project. According to World Bank staff in Kathmandu, they mentioned during interviews that he did so without further consultations in Nepal. Instead, the loan money was re-channelled into a so-called Power Development Fund that was supposed to finance the construction of other, smaller dams – although only a fraction of the money was actually spent. The other donors followed suit and the construction of the Arun-3 was frozen in late 1995 (cf. Bissell 2003).

Wolfensohn's decision has to be understood in the context of the intense pressure exerted on the World Bank through a well-organized transnational campaign by a network of local, national and transnational NGOs. It accused the Bank of not taking responsibility for the often disastrous effects of their credits and thus not being accountable to those adversely affected by its projects (Clark 2003). Both the Inspection Panel and the World Commission on Dams were created in response to the successful campaign against the highly controversial Narmada Valley Development Project in Central India. The activists had shown that, contrary to the claims of the Bank, the dam would displace several hundred thousand people without a proper mitigation plan and create significant environmental destruction (Baviskar 1995, Khagram 2004).

What makes the Arun-3 controversy remarkable is the urban-rural disjunction and the absence of an alliance between the activists in Kathmandu and the affected people around the dam site, who had high hopes connected to the construction of the dam. The rules of the Inspection Panel state that only persons who are directly affected by a World Bank project can request an investigation. So when the Arun Concerned Group in Kathmandu filed its complaint against the dam in the name of those affected by the project, the activists signed on behalf of two peasants from the Arun Valley, who had to be assured that their identity would be kept confidential for fear of hostility in their villages. Leading figures of the former NGO insist even today that they are unaware of the identities of the two peasants whose names appear in the letter to the Inspection Panel, which is now available in the public domain.

Not until 2008 was the government of Nepal able to restart the project and float a tender for a Build-Own-Operate-Transfer licence. A memorandum of understanding was signed with Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam (SJVN), an Indian public sector company,

granting the company 78.1% of the generated electricity for a period of 30 years before the structure would be handed over to the government of Nepal (MoWR & SJVN 2008).ⁱⁱ The company is a joint venture of the governments of India and Himachal Pradesh and owns the Nathpa Jhakri dam; a dam with an installed capacity of 1,500 megawatts and which is currently the largest hydropower scheme in India (Baviskar 2006). According to their website, ten more projects in India, Bhutan and Nepal are under way, while company representatives also mentioned plans to bid for contracts as far afield as Georgia and Panama. SJVN is currently re-surveying the Arun-3 site, but still waiting for a Detailed Project Agreement. None of the energy experts in Kathmandu approve of this arrangement, but nowadays hardly anybody questions the project as such.

As Nepal is facing daily power-cuts of up to 18 hours every winter, very few people are content with export-oriented hydropower production. Ratna Sansar Shrestha, a Kathmandu-based water resources analyst estimates that the demand in Eastern Nepal alone would consume the entire electricity output of the Arun-3 dam. On top of that, after sixty years of water-related treaties between Nepal and India there is the shared feeling among Nepalese citizens that every time the governments of the two countries negotiated water issues, the outcome was very much to the disadvantage of Nepal (cf. Dhungel & Pun 2008).

But these days there is no big civil-society mobilization against the Arun-3 and the other foreign funded, export-oriented hydropower projects to be found in Nepal. The small groups of activists who do campaign have to cope with a completely different public opinion than the so-called Anti-Arun campaigners in the early 1990s. The mood in Kathmandu has changed with the times. Whereas in the 1990s there was a

considerable number of people among the Nepalese urban middle-classes who were sympathetic to the activists' cause, after ten years of perennial power shortages in the country any campaign against new dams to them seems plainly anti-developmental.

The dam site

But what do people around the dam site make of this controversy? How have they been coping with over twenty years of uncertainty? On the basis of some hundred interviews from the Upper Arun Valley, conducted between November 2008 and January 2011, my impression is that the vast majority of the people are still in favour of the project. They expect to profit primarily from the access road in a valley that is remote and poorly connected to the industrial centres of Dharan and Biratnagar to the south, though many are also ambivalent about the unalloyed benefits of the new road infrastructure. On top of that, many hope for wage labour during construction and the electrification of their villages.

The Arun is the longest river in the Nepal Himalaya. It originates in Central Tibet and cuts through the Himalaya main ridge between the Mt. Everest/Makalu and the Kanchenjunga massifs, a fact that led the British geographer Edward Cronin (1979) to tag the Arun as "the world's deepest valley." With more than eighty per cent of its catchment area in the Trans-Himalaya (Shrestha 1989: 8), the river carries one of the highest minimum flows in the country. That makes it especially interesting for hydropower production. Given the fact that 90 per cent of the annual precipitation on the south slope of the Himalaya is concentrated on four months, power plants on the Arun would be a highly desired source of power generation during the dry season. The proposed dam site lies in the Sankhuwasabha district of Eastern Nepal, approximately 30 km south of the Chinese border. The two surrounding municipalities – Pathibhara

and Num Village Development Committees – are inhabited by a plurality of ethnic groups and castes with a clear majority of Yamphu Rai.

The Yamphu constitute the northern-most subgroup of the Rai, an ethnonym ascribed to more than fifteen linguistically distinct groups of different size in Eastern Nepal.ⁱⁱⁱ They are mountain peasants with a mixed farming system of tillage and animal husbandry and speak Tibeto-Burman languages. In the caste system of the Muluki Ain of 1854 they were listed in the group of “enslaveable alcohol-drinkers” (Höfer 1979: 141), facing severe marginalisation in Nepalese society until recently. The Rai share a relatively similar body of myths, constituting one important part of a vast corpus of oral literature that varies considerably from group to group. The Yamphu call this *mundhum*, and although this is their most important source of knowledge about how to interact with kin, neighbours, ancestors, the land and non-human entities, the influence of Hindu and Buddhist traditions is considerable as well.

The majority of Yamphu live in six villages all situated within two walking hours from the proposed dam site. Still, accounts of their number are inconsistent: The Census of 2001 states the number of Yamphu speakers as 1,722 (Gurung 2003: 46), while Armbrrecht Forbes (1995: 7) and Hansson (1991: 108) estimate it to be above 3000. Ethnic activists, however, would often triple that number, arguing with the considerable Yamphu diaspora in Bhojpur and Ilam districts as well as Darjeeling and the gulf countries.^{iv}

The Arun holds a very distinctive status in Yamphu cosmology. People often refer to it as the precondition for any life and say that Yiwa lives in the Arun, a powerful entity that is often called upon when embarking on a journey. Therefore, one concern connected to the construction of the Arun-3 is the fear that after the dam is completed,

all the water will be diverted and the river will run dry. That would make it impossible to perform Yiwa puja.

Still, after gauging the pros and cons, the majority of the people I talked to are in favour of the dam, often recounting the promises of development in colourful pictures: then “our children may study their books in bright light instead of traditional lamps,” as a middle-aged teacher put it.

Producing desire

Pieter de Vries (2007: 25) was confronted with a similar situation in the Peruvian Andes:

“[W]hen asking the villagers how they would define development, their answer is surprisingly straightforward: ‘an extensionist who comes to our field and tells us the kind of fertilisers we should apply in order to increase our yields.’”

Statements like that lead him to suggest “that we should relate to Third World people’s dreams and desires and not withdraw from the promise of development” (ibid: 26).

After discussing modernisation theory, radical political economy, post-structuralist governmentality approaches and theories of reflexive modernity, he postulates that they all share the problem of concentrating on the actuality of development. De Vries’ argument, however, is “that the actuality of development is supplemented by a virtual dimension, as manifested in the desire for, and imagination of, development” (ibid: 29).

To conceptualize that virtual dimension, de Vries proposes to understand development as a desiring machine, making use of a concept elaborated by Gilles Deleuze in the 1970s. Deleuze insists that “one never desires something or someone, but always desires an aggregate” (Stivale 2000). Together with Felix Guattari, he

introduced the notion of the desiring machine in their work on the *Anti-Oedipus*. There, they define desire as “the set of passive syntheses that engineer partial objects, flows, and bodies, and that function as units of production. The real is the end product. [...] Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another connected to it” (Deleuze & Guattari 1983: 28). In De Vries’ (2007: 32) understanding

“[D]evelopment as a desiring machine operates through the generation, spurring and triggering of desires, and by subsequently doing away with them. It is this double movement of the generation and banalisation of hope that constitutes the dialectics of desire.”

Although acknowledging the important contributions of governmentality approaches to recent development studies, de Vries criticises their neglect of this virtual dimension of development and distances himself especially from “present-day tendencies to embrace the idea of the ‘end of development’” (ibid: 26). Instead, he proposes to concentrate on the fact that people all over the Third World share a desire for development that needs to be taken seriously.

So, his critique of governmentality approaches aims at their preoccupation with the effects of development projects on power-relations on local, national and trans-national levels and the consequences on the consolidation of modern nation-states in the Third World that these projects often yield. Applying Michel Foucault’s insights about the coming-into-being of the modern state through the invention of new political techniques (like the prison, the clinic or demographics), governmentality approaches conceptualize development as yet another technique in that process, or a constellation of power/knowledge (cf. Foucault 1991). To outline that research program, de Vries engages at length with James Ferguson’s (1994) work on foreign aid and bureaucratization in Lesotho. Ferguson introduces the concept of the development

apparatus, a complex of institutions that generates its own form of discourse and constantly reproduces itself through its very own failure, thereby manufacturing specific forms of governance that depoliticise everything they touch. Development becomes an unquestionable meta-narrative: the anti-politics machine.

Apart from the fact that the notion of governmentality is not a central concept in the two mentioned classics of critical development studies, one can see a focus on a rather one-dimensional understanding of development as domination, as David Mosse (2005: 4-6) rightly observed. But surprisingly, de Vries' discussion of governmentality in development studies stops in the mid-1990s, not taking into account the continuous elaboration of this line of thought (e.g. Agrawal 2005, Escobar 1999, Gupta & Sharma 2006, Li 1999, 2007). Governmentality can be described as "a type of power which both acts *on* and *through* the agency and subjectivity of individuals as ethically free and rational subjects" (Shore & Wright 1997: 5, emphasis in original). And it is exactly that aspect of self-governing that de Vries leaves out of the picture for the sake of his argument against the call for an end of development. In contrast to that, my interviews will show that the desire for development cannot be understood without due consideration of the power relations between individuals, state- and non-state actors. As I understand the discourses surrounding the controversial dam, the "dialectics of desire" (de Vries 2007: 32) and the actuality of development governmentality constantly overlap each other. To move beyond the politically charged and abstract discussion of whether development should be abandoned or reformed, I want to embed the following discussion in David Mosse's proposal for a new ethnography of development that instead focuses on analysing the empirical workings of the development machine. He

reminds us that “the ethnographic question is not whether but *how* development projects work” (Mosse 2005: 8, emphasis in original).

Remembering the Future

When people around the dam site tell their memories of the 1990s, I often have to think about Karl Valentin’s (1991) aphorism: “In the past the future was better, too.” When they speak about their belied desire for development and the cancelled dam, they often recount a future that never happened. With the resumption of the Arun-3 their hopes have been re-ignited. But as there is very little information on the progress of the project, many people believe that it has been cancelled again, leaving them in a loop of permanent uncertainty – de Vries’ desiring machine that “operates through the generation, spurring and triggering of desires, and by subsequently doing away with them” (2007: 32).

The overwhelming majority of my dialogue partners agrees that “development’s main pillars are electricity and transportation“ as Prem Prasad Rai put it, a teacher from Uwa who represents the area in the Constituent Assembly in Kathmandu. After that most of my interlocutors mention the word *suidha* that can be translated as facilities or convenience:

“If development is in place, there will be a road here that will bring facilities to the local people. If electricity is made available to us, we will be able to live in the light, watch TV, and use the computer. Whatever it is, if development occurs it will be good”

as Sangita Rai stated. The young woman is running a tailor shop in Hedangna.

The people I interviewed insisted that development is something desperately needed, sometimes even something they pray for, but at the same time they express the

futility of their desire. Everybody knows that the Arun-3 will generate electricity and everybody agrees that the villages around the dam should be connected to the national grid, but hardly anybody believes that this will happen, resonating the situation Ferguson (1999) describes in his work on the decline of the Zambian copperbelt. The important difference is that his example shows a region in decline, a place that once was developed and no longer is while the desire for a modern life persists as the hope is belied. In my example, people would often state categorically: “there is no development here” (yahā bikās chhaina) – and there has never been any. But the ubiquity of development talk seems to be rather recent; as Klaus Seeland’s (1980) fieldwork in the Arun Valley in 1978/79 noted, in those days nobody talked about bikās.

“Some foreign country should get Nepal and develop it”

That observation indicates the significance of state interventions for the negotiation of development desires as people’s self-perception as backward is strongly mediated through processes of governmentality. The notion of development holds a very peculiar space in Nepalese society. As Stacy Pigg (1992) has convincingly argued, the idea of the post-1960 nation-state of Nepal is inseparable from the concept of development. Bikās operates as a strong marker of difference that separates city from village, elites from poor people and the developed countries from Nepal, thereby producing a multi-fold social map that is essentializing the countryside as a place bound in tradition and ignorance.

Pigg shows how that topos is reproduced in schoolbooks and local discourse, a technique of power that is clearly at work in the Arun Valley as well. Many people define their everyday lives as a situation of lack, asking me: “Why are you coming here? We have no road, no electricity, no running water,” and often very outspokenly frame

the current situation of Nepal in clearly evolutionist terms, stating that “we are 500 years behind Europe” or even “we are in the Stone Age” reminiscent of what Akhil Gupta (1998) has termed the post-colonial condition for rural Northern India. He identifies this attitude as “a pervasive feeling of being underdeveloped, of being behind the West, articulated with other identities of caste, class, region, gender, and sexuality” (ibid: ix) that is “constitutive of local‘ lives and ‘local‘ systems of meaning“ (ibid: 6). There are even people bemoaning the fact that Nepal was never colonized – one teenager from Hedangna told me that “some foreign country should get Nepal and develop it. Not India, we don’t like the Indians, but maybe the UK,” reminding me of Joan Robinson’s (Edwards 1999: 12) remark that the only thing worse than being exploited by capitalism is not being exploited by it.

But with the awarding of the contract to SJVN, the Indian influence in the valley will increase considerably over the course of the next years. The company has opened a project information office and is holding meetings with indigenous rights activists twice a year. Their website shows an extensive effort to comply with the transnational discourse of Corporate Social Responsibility and also their staff has been trying to convince me in several interviews that their main concern is to “uplift the living standard of the people.” One engineer told me that he has tears in his eyes when he walks up to the villages and sees the children playing in the dust. People living in the Upper Arun Valley, however, are suspicious about the intentions of the Indian company.

As most people, Sangita, the young tailor, thinks that the project should be constructed for the sake of national development, but personally she does not expect any benefits:

“The project is about generating electricity, but we don’t know when we will receive it. It has been mentioned that the electricity will be directly sent to India. If it goes to India, then we will have darkness below the electricity production site.”

Adding to that, many people express the fear that better connectivity will lead to an increase in crime and an erosion of local culture through the growing Indian influence.

In Sangita’s words:

“There are people who are afraid that robbers will come after the development of a road in this area. If the Arun-3 is implemented then there will be 16,000 to 17,000 people working in this area, so there are high chances of being robbers among them [...] What I have heard is that we need to learn Hindi. [...] Our local people don’t even know how to speak Nepali, how can they know Hindi? If we forcefully learn their language, then our traditional language and culture will start to disappear.”

That opinion is widespread, despite the fact that seasonal work migration to India has been an integral part of the local economy for more than two generations. The suspicions against India go so far that some people even suspect the Indian government behind the cancellation of the World Bank loan in 1995: “I don’t think the World Bank cancelled the project due to protest. They have understood something else. Maybe the World Bank in Nepal had a talk with India” as a teacher and former activist in Khandbari speculated. To make sense of the twisted project history, he came up with a telling picture during that interview:

“I think that Arun-3 is a beauty but she is unable to be anyone’s wife. So she prostitutes herself with each and every man. I believe that India will not be able to complete the project.”

Missing women and stolen treasures

The question of prostitution is indeed a serious issue for many people around the dam

site – but normally they think about it less figuratively. One of the most persistent concerns is about issues of sexuality and a transformation of gender relations in the wake of the increased contact with distant places and people. Many people recount their memories of the first Arun-3 construction phase by telling stories of powerless “local people” and how they get exploited by powerful external actors: “We have seen many outsiders who promise things to women and leave them after physical contact.”

Laxman Rai worked at the construction site from the very beginning and remembers the incidents that happened in the 1990s:

“They took away about a dozen girls. [...] It wasn’t foreigners but Nepali people took them. One of them took a Newari girl all the way to Kanchanpur [a district in the Far West]. I found it very funny. [...] Some were taken away; some were left in the middle of the way. Some also came back to the village.”

It is important to note, though, that women talk very differently about that issue. While they as well express concerns about changing gender relations due to the influx of Indian construction workers, their outlook is much less bleak. Bringing up that topic among women often led to laughter and teasing comments in the vein of Mandira Mahate’s remark: “Like you, maybe some others will come and go after women.” As Katharine Rankin (2003: 124) has shown in her work on changing economic patterns in Central Nepal, “women use space strategically, even if they consent on systems of gender subordination.” My material suggests that women in the upper Arun Valley anticipate the emerging changes in gender relations not mainly as a threat, but also as a chance for increased agency.

Laxman also provided further information on a topic that had come up several times when talking with villagers about the reason for the cancellation. The suspicion that the foreigners used the hydro project only as a smoke screen for a totally different

purpose: the theft of hidden treasures that were buried in the ground. Often people would speak of a golden calve or rooster that was found during the tunnel works. As Parbati Parajuli, a peasant woman in her early fifties from Hedangna, explains:

“What I have heard is that they have taken out a gold statue. [...] Actually, I heard that the statue is made out of half gold and half diamond. Even before, Arun-3 people lied to the locals saying that they will generate electricity. But once they dug out the items, why would they generate electricity? They left the village in a mess without completing their project.”

Laxman is not sure about the whole thing either. As somebody who was working the drilling machine, he knows for sure that the foreigners took away a lot of stones by helicopter that were “round and shiny” but as to the question whether there was gold or diamonds he remarks: “If there was any, they probably hid it and took it away.” His younger cousin who is working as a teacher in Num laughs about the story – as many young educated people in the area: “It is said there is no gold on the top of Mount Makalu, why should there be gold here?”

All the ethnic groups in the Upper Arun Valley share the strong belief that the area is blessed with a hidden wealth that is buried underground (cf. Daniggelis 1997). The Buddhist groups, for instance, believe that Guru Rimpoche meditated in the caves above the pastures of Yangle. Apparently, the saint hid important teachings in the area thus transforming it into a Beyul, a hidden valley, which is supposed to function as a sanctuary for devotees during the time of samsāra (cf. Diemberger 1997).

This narrative stands in stark contrast to numerous ethnographic accounts from Melanesia on so-called cargo cults where mysterious foreigners actually bring mystical wealth – the cargo – instead of taking it away as in my example. Ton Otto (2009) explains those movements as emanation of the social changes initiated by colonialism.

The sudden influx of Western valuables in societies that were based on gift exchange, personal prestige and a strong sense of gerontocracy led to considerable tensions, as it was mostly young men who could acquire the cargo by working on trading ships or plantations. On the other hand, he argues, the fact that white people exchanged commodities with Melanesians but denied to enter into social relations and share their knowledge of how they gained their wealth, “offended Melanesian notions of morality” (ibid: 91). Therefore, a common theme in many of these movements was that once that knowledge had been found, the ancestors would bring unlimited prosperity. Against that idea of a wealthy future stands my interlocutors’ perception of a wealth that has passed. But both accounts share a very strong sentiment of denied co-operation, powerlessness and exploitation. Otto’s citation (ibid.) of a Papuan: “White people do not help the black man. They found the way, but hide it from us” resembles the disappointed comments about those foreigners who never accomplished what they had promised I heard countless times.

But this is only one way of how people around the dam site try to explain how the development machine does away with the desires it creates. Another common line of argument is to put the blame on the political conflict between the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist & Leninist) and the Nepali Congress. Shortly before the general elections in November 1994, then-UML-General Secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal had written a letter to the President of the World Bank asking him to postpone any decision until the new government would be formed.

“It is also important that a formal and meaningful debate takes place in the Parliament, and a national consensus is built therefrom before any final decision is made about large projects like the Arun III” (Nepal 1994).

He did not, however, take a clear stand on the issue.

Concluding remarks

De Vries' appeal for a serious examination of people's desire for development is an important contribution to development studies, but I see his dichotomous juxtaposition of desiring-production and governmentality as deeply problematic. As I have tried to show through a discussion of discourses on development and the stalled construction of the Arun-3 dam, the desire for development is deeply entangled with complex techniques of power spanning from the local to the transnational. De Vries depicts governmentality as an approach solely focusing on the repressive aspect of power relations, not taking into account how it tries to conceptualize the way these power relations prove to be productive in processes of self-governing and subjectivation. Pigg (1992) has shown how the development machine constitutes the topos of the ignorant villager and how it then re-inscribes itself into the self-perception of people living in villages, a process resembling Gupta's (1998) post-colonial condition that is also at work in the Upper Arun Valley. As the aforementioned Parbati told me: "In Hedangna there has been no development so far. If someone tries to develop this place another one will start pulling their leg" bemoaning the "ignorance" of local people.

Furthermore, I see a fundamental problem in applying the concept of the desiring machine exclusively on Third World people's desire for development: the danger of othering desire. Deleuze and Guattari developed their concept of the desiring machine to come to terms with processes of consumption in capitalist conditions, therefore the discussion of the desire for development cannot be limited to the Third World. Neither is that desire limited to people's hopes for road construction or electrification. In the Upper Arun Valley, especially teachers, ethnic activists and local

party functionaries point to the social dimensions of development: they mention human and indigenous rights, or state that development is “that local people change their minds and start working together, not against each other,” sometimes even mentioning gender equality as a defining feature.

The longing for an improvement of infrastructure, a steady income through wage labour or an increased rule of law is definitely not a special feature of people in Third World countries. On the contrary, the desire for development is at the very core of Western self-conception. The current fears of economic recession and the growing social unrest in the European Union show how important the discourse of economic growth was for the maintenance of social peace in post-war Europe. Therefore, I believe that a serious examination of development and desire has to overcome the dichotomy of Third and First World and engage ethnographically with a multiplicity of sites to better understand how development works – as Mosse (2005: 8) proposed. This is not to ignore the vast differences between Arun and Silicon Valley but to acknowledge the fact that global flows of people, capital and ideas go hand in hand with global flows of desire.

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- ⁱ All first names of laypersons have been changed, leaving their caste affiliations intact. Yamphu Rai mostly use the last name Rai, although some younger ethnic activists recently changed their names into Yamphu
- ⁱⁱ While using the original design of the World Bank project, SJVN is determined to increase the installed capacity from 402 to 900 MW, apparently planning to use the plant mainly to cope with peak-current conditions. That intention will not fit with the Nepalese requirements as the main problem is a lack in base load.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The exact number of groups and languages is open to debate, both academically (cf. Hansson 1991) and among Rai themselves. Gaenszle (2000: 3) speaks of at least 50 distinct dialects and languages.
- ^{iv} When it comes to language skills as such, Yamphu (2010: 4) on the other hand argues that the number of fluent speakers has actually reached a critical level, seeing the language on the verge of extinction. In Hedangna, I observed a strong tendency for the use of Nepali, especially among people below the age of forty, but first language acquisition to be still largely in Yamphu.